

WALKING ALL THE WAY TO THE BANK

Getting good mileage out of dog walk fundraisers

BY JAMES HETTINGER





IN MARYLAND, they March for the Animals. In Massachusetts, they Strut for Strays. Denver used to do the Doggy Dash; now it's got the Furry Scurry.

Dog walk fundraisers (and their clever names) are a staple in the animal sheltering and rescue community—a fun way for organizations to generate money by bringing together animal lovers and their pooches to exercise, socialize, sample local vendors' goods, enter contests, play games, enjoy entertainment, and maybe meet a local celebrity. Their appeal is universal: A walk through the park with your dog and your animal-loving neighbors on a sunny spring or crisp fall day—what's not to like?

"Everybody loves a dog walk, and if the weather's good, it's perfect," says Aileen Gabbey, executive director of the Maryland SPCA. For the organizers, of course, it's a whirlwind, says Gabbey, who used to run her group's signature fundraising event, the March for the Animals. "It's like your wedding day," she recalls.

As with weddings, the big event is often worth the whirlwind of preparation that precedes it. Shelters can draw big crowds and raise substantial sums of money to benefit animals. In Denver, the Dumb Friends League's Furry Scurry—billed as the nation's largest dog walk—last year attracted about 10,000 people and 5,000 dogs, and raised more than \$1 million.

But also like weddings, dog walks don't just come together on their own. "There's a lot of work that goes into a dog walk, and you don't really know that until you actually do one," says Debbie Kiggans, a volunteer and board member at the Humane Society of York County in South Carolina, which held its first walk last year.

Organizers need to ask lots of questions beforehand, and develop a seemingly endless list of tasks, leaving no detail overlooked. What's the best date? Where's the most convenient and attractive location? Is there enough parking? Do we need a parade permit? How should we raise funds? How will we publicize it? Have we got enough volunteers for setup and cleanup? Are everyone's assignments clear? All of those questions need to have clear answers before you say "I do" to an event that can take a tremendous amount of resources—but can reap tremendous rewards.

First Things First

Start with a vision of what you want your walk to be, says Lara Provance, a former conferences and events manager

for The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), which has co-hosted an annual walk in Washington, D.C., and is now in its second year of hosting one in Montauk, N.Y. Do you want it to be just a walk? Or more of a daylong festival, with games for the human and animal attendees, booths for vendors, maybe a "fun run" for people?

Ideally, you want to begin planning nine to 12 months before the event—and if you're hosting your first walk, it's often best to keep it simple, Provance says, then add more activities in subsequent years. "Know what you want to do, and then execute it the best that you can. And then if you want to add on to it next year, you can," she explains. "... But having a very clear focus, having a very clear vision from the beginning is really important."

Once you've got a vision, you can start thinking about a date and venue, says Krista Rakovan, The HSUS's conferences and events director. Dog walks tend to be held in the spring or fall, since the chances for good weather are higher. Provance advises organizers to pick a window—September-October, for example—then investigate what else is happening in the community on specific weekends. Make sure your dog walk isn't competing with, say, a popular marathon or a local college football game. Choose a date and a time of day that works best for your community.

No matter what time of year you select, weather is always a potential issue, notes Stacy LeBaron, president of the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society (MRFRS) in Massachusetts, which for 16 years has held its Strut for Strays—a dog walk/festival that raises money for the cat rescue group. When it held its Strut in June, the group sometimes encountered temperatures in the 90s, so the event has been moved to May. Now, instead, they have to worry about rain, LeBaron says. "I think you just have to just take a leap of faith and decide, 'I like this date!' and just go with it." And once you've established a season for your event, she adds, stick with it year after year, because your participants will grow accustomed to it.

Considering potential locations, remember your vision: Can the space accommodate the event that you're picturing? Is it aesthetically pleasing? Does the venue even permit dogs?

Given the common rules barring animals from public transport systems, people will more than likely be driving to your event, so you'll need a flat, accessible space for parking, with enough room for your anticipated crowd.

You'll need to map out your walk route beforehand. If your walkers will be going through a town or neighborhood, make sure the route is safe—does it have sidewalks?—and free of roadblocks or construction areas.

You also want to stay on the right side of the law by obtaining the necessary permits or approvals from the local governing bodies. "And that can take a long time. We had to jump through several hoops to get everything in line as far as the permits go" for the Montauk walk, Provance says.



Organizers can spruce up their dog walk fundraisers with contests celebrating the best-costumed pets.



With proper planning, your walk can grow into a festival of activities for dog lovers and their pets. The Furry Scurry in Denver features demonstrations, contests, vendors' booths, and entertainment in addition to the two-mile walk.

"But in most cases the towns are really receptive. They like dogs. They like people coming together."

Developing a budget is an important early step when you're planning a dog walk fundraiser, Provance says. Consider the cost of permits, tents, transportation, food, and other budget items, then estimate likely revenue versus expenses. Provance likes to devote less than 20 percent of revenue to expenses, but acknowledges that that can be a difficult goal; special events are expensive. Spending 20 to 25 percent of funds raised on expenses is standard, LeBaron adds.

To Market, to Market

The better you spread the word, the greater chance you'll hit your revenue goals.

Your plan should detail what you're going to do in the months before the event, which could include getting the word out through brochures, social media, press releases, emails to your supporters, and mentions on sponsors' websites. You'll need to decide whether to buy ads or rely on donated advertising and free notices in, say, local newspapers' community calendars.

Marketing and design can't be rushed, so make sure you budget adequate time to design logos, fliers, and T-shirts, Kiggans says. "That's one phase that you just can't pull together at the last minute." Ideally, you can find someone skilled who'll do the work pro bono; the York County walk

was lucky enough to snag a marketing professional as a volunteer.

The walkers themselves are another means of marketing the event—one that's sometimes overlooked, according to Provance. "Your participants are there because they want to help. Use them. Use them as a means of communicating to other people out there," she says.

Make it easy for them to print or email a flier, or to share it on Facebook. "Word-of-mouth is one of the biggest ways that people find out about these events."

Tapping Your Resources

Any organization thinking of starting a dog walk should take a hard look at its resources, including its volunteers, as well as the community's capacity for giving, says Rick Gabrielson, vice president of development and communications at the Dumb Friends League.

The Furry Scurry, which succeeded a fundraiser called the Doggy Dash in 1994, has grown into such an enormous event because of the reciprocal benefits for the DFL and its community of pet lovers, Gabrielson says.

The DFL, which provides care for about 25,000 animals a year, enjoys a great relationship with people in the Denver metropolitan area, he says. A two-mile walk that also features pet contests, vendors, and entertainment, the Scurry is much-anticipated by Denver pet owners. Many participants adopted their pets from the DFL, and the



Baltimore-area residents and their dogs get together in February at a kickoff event for the Maryland SPCA's March for the Animals, which takes place in April.

Scurry gives them an opportunity to give back, he explains. At the same time, the Scurry serves as a way for the DFL to thank people for going into the community, raising money through pledges, and serving as ambassadors for the organization.

Beyond that, Colorado is a very cat- and dog-friendly state, Gabrielson says. People love going for walks with their dogs and care deeply about charitable organizations, and the Scurry allows them to indulge those passions. "There's an energy at this event that is hard to describe. ... you put a bunch of these people together in a park on a sunny Colorado morning, you can feel it. It's a wonderful experience."

The DFL runs the event with the help of 600 volunteers, in addition to staff members who plan the event throughout the year. Smaller shelters initiating a walk should start with a small, solid event and a five-year plan, he advises. To grow your walk, look at every aspect of it—from the volunteers at setup to your signage, fundraising methods, and interactions with the public. Goal-setting and keeping your

volunteer team involved will help keep the event moving forward, he adds.

Provance advises event organizers to be realistic about both their available resources and the amount of work involved in planning and running a dog walk. "Don't underestimate the amount of work that it's going to take," she says. " ... It's an undertaking, but it's not impossible if you can mobilize a core of very dedicated, trustworthy people ... a few people that you know will get the job done."

Planners tend to want to do everything themselves, she adds, but they need to delegate tasks to trusted volunteers. Otherwise, "you'll drown in all the details."

Events are typically organized by a committee of staff and volunteers, but a larger group will be needed on the day of the walk to handle registration, setup, breakdown, and a host of other on-site tasks. The MRFRS's Strut, which typically attracts about 60 dogs and 200 to 250 people, is organized by a team of 12 to 15 and run with the help of 30 to 40 volunteers on the day of the event—with a volunteer

coordinator who's responsible for just those volunteers on that day.

Lining up any celebrity attendees early helps to energize the volunteer group, according to LeBaron. In her community, she says, when people know that the Strut for Strays will include local TV anchorman Randy Price and local band Soul Robot, they rally around the idea of making it a great event.

Make the volunteers' assigned jobs crystal clear, LeBaron advises. "And make sure that they know why we're asking them to work so hard," she adds. This year, for example, the MRFRS is trying to raise money to renovate a bathroom, and also coping with veterinary bills that are \$25,000 higher than they've been in the past—issues that a successful fundraiser can help address.

The volunteers working the registration table need to be particularly well-informed about the scheduled events and their locations, Kiggans adds, since they're the main point of contact for people arriving at the event.

And don't forget to keep your volunteers well fed and replenished with beverages. "You have to take care of them," Rakovan says.

Following the Money ... Electronically

Registration fees typically don't come close to covering an event's expenses, Provance notes, so you'll want your participants to collect donations.

Traditionally, walkers collected cash from their supporters, put it in an envelope, and turned it in on event day. That option is still available, but many events have supplemented it with online fundraising. Walkers go to one of the websites devoted to charitable fundraising, create a personal Web page highlighting their event, then email the page with a weblink to their friends and colleagues.

"Fundraising online has helped take many events across the country to the next level," Gabrielson says.

LeBaron can testify to that: MRFRS added online donations in 2010 and nearly doubled its donations.

The Maryland SPCA's March for the Animals has no registration fee, but like many other events it offers incentives for participants to raise money—\$30 will get you a goodie bag, for example, and for \$40 or more you also get a T-shirt. The top fundraiser gets a trip to the Bahamas.

You can use a similar approach to attract sponsors to your event. Create different sponsorship levels, with those who donate more money getting more prominent mentions in publicity and signage.

Setting up its first dog walk, the Humane Society of York County got solid support from local businesses, which helped defray costs. Sponsors rented the facility and donated food, drinks, and goodie bag items. The humane society also raised money from the fees vendors paid to set up their booths, and through a raffle.

The event "really kind of took on a life of its own," Kiggans adds, as people added creative activities. As word spread, a local petting zoo offered to bring its animals. One sponsor brought a llama for small children to ride. Another held games for owners to play with their dogs, such as musical chairs using hula hoops. A local Sports Clips barbershop ran a raffle where the winning numbers were determined by shelter dogs retrieving numbered tennis balls.

The end result? A fun event that did better than expected. Humane society officials had hoped to raise \$5,000 but ended up netting \$6,300, and Kiggans says they'll hold another walk/festival this year.

Your vendors need not be restricted to animal-oriented businesses, adds LeBaron. The MRFRS's Strut has hosted booths by a cat-food caterer and a business selling cat-shaped soaps and candles, but also a landscaper, an organic gardener, and food vendors. The event is essentially open to any business that wants to support the group's work, she explains, and event organizers ask vendors to encourage their customers to attend the walk.

Showtime

The day of the walk is finally here. People and their pooches are arriving to enter the "cutest pet" contest, watch flyball demonstrations, check out the vendors' booths, or take a look at your adoptable dogs parading around in their "adopt me" vests.



Two dogs tussle near a doggie pool at the Downtown Dog Resort & Spa in Baltimore during a kickoff event for the Maryland SPCA's March for the Animals. More fun was set for the event itself, which has evolved into a festival featuring an agility course, a "smart pet tricks" contest, and other activities.

How do you make sure the activities happen as planned, and a good time is had by all?

LeBaron says the most important factor is a good flow plan—one that keeps everyone organized and ensures that the announcements of various activities are timed correctly. You don't necessarily need a band—you can probably get by with a deejay or an iPod to provide some good high-energy tunes—but you definitely need a good sound system for making announcements. "If people can't hear you, they're not gonna have a good time," she says.

LeBaron likens walk participants to "a group of kindergarteners" in need of some direction. If you don't let them know what's going on, they might congregate in the middle of the site and not really engage with anything. "You have to tell them about the booths," she says. "You have to make sure that they know that something unique is going on over in that booth there—somebody's doing massages, or whatever."

That approach has brought more structure to the MRFRS's Strut, LeBaron says. One or two people are designated as emcees and given scripts and a schedule. The event is almost like a performance, with scripts and cues, ensuring that attendees know when to walk and when to mingle, and the band knows when it's supposed to play.

What's Next?

The crowds have gone home. What do you do now?

Well, it's no time to relax. Immediate follow-up with the participants is important, Provance says. The day after the Montauk walk, organizers communicated with the walkers, letting them know how much money the event raised, and who the top fundraisers were. "They raised money for you, they just came out and spent the day with you, so don't leave them hanging," she says.

Surveying staff, volunteers, attendees, and vendors—formally or informally—is a good way to gather suggestions for improving the event.

Dog walk organizers agree that events need to evolve in order to stay fresh and keep people coming back. Ideally, you'll even grow your event. "They're either gonna go to the next level, or we're not gonna have them," LeBaron says of the MRFRS's events. "Stagnant is no longer acceptable for us."

And how do you get to that elusive next level?

Try to add something different each year, Gabbey says. People seem to like the activities that have made the Maryland SPCA's March more of an all-day festival featuring an agility course, pet training tips, a pet communicator, and the organization's adoption van. The walk kicks off at 10 a.m., but people can complete the route at their leisure throughout the day, and some walk the 1.5-mile loop several times if they've got a particularly active dog, adds Tami Gosheff, the Maryland SPCA's special events and outreach coordinator. Other people just hang out and watch the contests all day.

Simply changing the logo on the T-shirts helps keep some fans coming back to the 16-year-old event. "We have



Dog walks are a fundraising staple for animal welfare organizations, and when the weather cooperates—as it did during the 2010 Furry Scurry sponsored by the Dumb Friends League in Denver—they can provide a little slice of heaven for pet lovers and their pooches.

people that have done the March every single year," Gosheff says, "and have the T-shirt from every single year."

LeBaron believes that the Strut drew some younger people last year because of its increased use of social media, and the performance by Soul Robot, which has a youthful following. This year, she hopes to connect with more local dog rescue groups by making sure they're aware of the Strut and feel fully invited.

Dog walk planners trying to maintain or grow their participant base have the advantage of a near-foolproof event—one that taps into people's generosity and compassion for animals.

"I don't think people are ever tired of doing walks," Provance says. "... People love to participate in these things, but you have to make it a good experience for them to make them want to come back. And making it a good experience starts with proper planning."

After each MRFRS fundraiser, LeBaron analyzes the volunteer hours and the dollars raised to figure out if the event is worth the effort. You need to think about how you're spending your time. Would you be better off soliciting donations through the mail? If you spend six months organizing a walk and net \$9,000, should you instead pursue a \$10,000 grant?

Perhaps you're still debating whether you want to take the first step, so to speak. Is a dog walk fundraiser a good idea for your shelter or animal welfare organization?

"I would certainly give it a try," Gabrielson says. "... It's not only about fundraising for the animals in your care, it's also about a community presence. It's a chance for you to showcase your programs and services to the participants at the event, and really tell the story of where the money goes." 